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SUBJECT: The Situation in Syria

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1. Syria's current domestic and international difficulties, which have aroused Soviet interest and have produced threats of a leftist coup and of Iraqi military intervention, are likely to continue to worsen even if no military action materializes. The root of the trouble--chronic Syrian political instability--seems ineradicable under present conditions.

2. In ten years of independence Syria's two major political parties--the conservative Nationalists and Populists--have been unable to establish effective parliamentary government and have therefore been continually harassed by army intervention in political affairs. Thus, in the 14 months since the overthrow of the four-year-old military dictatorship of Colonel Adib Shishakli, Syria has had four weak coalition cabinets. The current one is sustained in power by the direct support of the army chief of staff.

3. The present cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Sabri Asali but dominated by Foreign Minister Khalid Azm is, from a Western point of view, worse than its three predecessors. The group represented by Azm and supported by Chief of Staff Shawkat Shuqayr consists of opportunistic independents, the extremist Arab Socialist-Resurrectionist Party and the increasingly active Communists. Prime Minister Asali ostensibly but ineffectually represents conservative, pro-Western Syrians.

4. The union within the cabinet of these two disparate groups has been so unnatural that an early and perhaps forcible collapse of the government has been expected. So far, however, the crisis has been averted by the virtual surrender of Asali, who has confessed his powerlessness to cope with Foreign Minister Azm. The struggle has been taken up by pro-Western Syrians outside the cabinet and by Iraq and Turkey, which are strongly opposed to Azm's foreign policy.

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5. This policy--the issue on which the struggle for power has been joined--is aimed at effecting Syrian participation in the defense pact which Egypt and Saudi Arabia have proposed as a counter to Iraq's conclusion of a pact with Turkey last February. Azm's interest in this policy lies in his apparent belief that the support of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well as of the anti-Iraqi and anti-Western Arab Socialist-Resurrectionist Party, is indispensable to his bid this September for the Syrian presidency.

6. Azm seemed considerably sobered by the strong Iraqi, Turkish and Western opposition to the proposed pact and therefore attempted to eliminate its anti-Iraqi character

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he has shown, probably under pressure from the army supporters of the Arab Socialist-Resurrectionist Party, a willingness to sign the pact as soon as the Egyptian leaders return from the Afro-Asian conference at Bandung opening on 18 April.

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7. This prospect has angered both Baghdad and Istanbul and has alarmed Syria's President Atasi. All are stoutly opposed to the signature of any pact.

8. Baghdad has long been interested in effecting closer economic, military and political relations with Syria, and such relations seem dictated by fundamental factors such as tradition, geography and economy. Vested interests in Syria and the opposition of other states--particularly Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel and France--have continually operated against such a development.

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10. Without Iraqi intervention or unprecedented Turkish and Western pressure, Azm would probably continue to ride roughshod over the rest of the cabinet and the disorganized conservatives. The conclusion of the pact with Egypt and Saudi Arabia would be a victory for the leftist, anti-Western coalition that dominates the Syrian government. It would leave this group in a strong position to capture the Syrian presidency and thus strengthen its hold on Syria.

11. Even if Iraq were to occupy Syria militarily for the purpose of replacing the present cabinet with a rightist civilian government, the move would, if successful, still leave unsolved the problem of how to establish a stable regime, with a pro-Western orientation, in Syria.

12. Syria's difficulties, particularly the deterioration in its relations with Turkey, have attracted Soviet interest. Moscow's propaganda broadcasts have given considerable attention to the situation, emphasizing its connection with "imperialist designs" regarding Middle East defense.

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the USSR is merely seeking to stiffen Azm's position in order to intensify the Turkish-Syrian dispute, while avoiding any direct commitment which might appear as Soviet interference in the area. Given the physical difficulties and political problems involved, Moscow is not likely to give Syria more concrete support at this time, beyond, possibly, some financial aid.



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